



Olympiad

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This historical novel takes as its basis the fact that 2776 years ago a group of men ran between two piles of stones, and invented history. If, that is, history can be believed. All we know now is the name of the man who won the race in the first ever Olympic Games in 776 BC.

Olympiad Details

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Author : Tom Holt

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From Reader Review Olympiad for online ebook

Levi O`loughlin says

I just couldn't get into it, clever as it was. I skimmed much through the middle.

Pulpbomb says

Eh, just ok.

Andrew Double says

While it made me smile at times I felt left behind due to my lack of understanding of Ancient History. A bit eclectic for me.

Tlaloc says

Olympiad is definitely the first historical novel of its kind I've read.

It's humorous, witty, and ironical, exploring the philosophical themes of history: what it really is (and the reasons behind why its recorded and for whose benefit), just how faithfully it's preserved, and how much we can ever know by studying it.

It's also an adventure novel of modest scale. No big occurrences or notable historical events occur during the plot, which goes well with its lets-not-take-ourselves-seriously approach, and this may bore some readers familiar with other types of historical fiction.

Ultimately its driven by the characters, a ragtag group of everyday louts and sometimes vagabonds. It's fiction, but set way back, and Holt pulls it off admirably.

Clay Kallam says

Tom Holt's "Olympiad" was a very pleasant surprise -- instead of the usual staid ancient Greeks moving through their paces with reverent attitudes and deep connections to concerns that we no longer share, the protagonists here are snarky brothers who narrate the attempts by the city of Elis to start the very first Olympics.

Though my area of (some) expertise is several hundred years later, from all I know about Greece at this time, Holt is right on the money -- from the resistance to using writing, to the non-comprehension of the idea of "trade," to the sanctity of the guest and the ubiquity of the blood feud. But all of this is delivered in a series of picaresque adventures as the two brothers travel through the Peloponnese (the land area west of Athens

where Sparta is located) trying to convince aspiring athletes that funeral games are not the only time that runners, jumpers, boxers, wrestlers and strong men should show off their skills.

The conclusion trails off a bit, but the ride is fun, the writing sharp and the window on the ancient world clear and clever. Of course we can never know if Holt is right about how people thought and acted, or other more conservative writers are, but I like this view quite a bit -- and I liked the book quite a bit too.

Rob says

An unusual historical fiction that pairs a thorough and insightful understanding of the ancient Greek world with a brazenly modern and arch tone. Normally, I dislike a modern tone and dialogue in historical fiction. It comes across as lazy and breaks my sense of immersion. However, in this case it's not a problem because Holt's evident expertise in the world sustains his credibility, while the playful and conversational tone makes for pleasant reading.

The story is something of a bumbling picaresque, with the two brothers narrating their wanderings and misadventures with the wry detachment of decades of hindsight. Yet tragedy peeks through the farcical tone often enough to give the novel some real heft. Even for clever men of the 'better sort', the Greece of the 8th century B.C. is a harsh and arbitrary world. One day you're enjoying the open-handed hospitality of a local lord, the next you're walking the dusty road hungry and penniless. There's a scene where the travellers approach a renowned city with great anticipation, only to find it was burned to ground some time ago, and now lies abandoned. Time marches apace.

There are some puzzling lapses. Early in the novel, one of the brothers is described as a callow young man participating in battle for the first time, carrying a package of food his mother prepared for him. In the next chapter, he is shown to be a man in his prime with wife and farm, pulling an old chariot out of the barn. And this is ostensibly only days or maybe weeks after the battle. Several lapses of this sort give the impression of hasty writing and superficial editing.

Still, Holt has a breezy voice and offers up some laughs without trivializing his subject. Olympiad left a strong enough impression that I'll be seeking out more of his works.

Louise Beilby says

Olympiad is a book which serves two functions - as well as being an extremely entertaining and amusing read, it also sums up the problems that any historian of Ancient Greece faces when trying to piece together a narrative of true historical events. If Cleander and Cratus can't even agree on what happened to them twenty-odd years ago, and they didn't write anything down, how can we trust the stories that were orally passed down over generations? And then again, if the Phoenician visitor is the one who knows how to write, and we're relying on him to tell us about Ancient Greece, will the version of events that he tells us be coloured by his views of the Greeks as being uncivilised types who guzzle horrible wine and eat nothing but meat?

The most moving episode to my mind is near the end, when the brothers visit what they think is the home of a legendary wrestler, only to find that he died decades earlier and has only lived on in the form of songs and stories. But at least he is still remembered - once the stories stop being told, he will lose his favoured place in the Elysian Fields and be just another voice howling amongst the multitude in the underworld. It's an uncomfortable thought even for somebody entirely without superstition.

All this makes Olympiad seem rather serious and worthy, but it really isn't - it just manages to be a lot more profound and thought-provoking than its jokey tone lets on.

Richard Beasley says

Annoyingly nearly good, but not quite.

I find Tom Holt very frustrating, the ideas are potentially funny, the humour is "wry", there is some depth in there - but somehow it does just miss the mark. I will preserve - but Jasper fforde is funnier

Ronit Gagin says

Very good. A lot of humor and dark irony as only an English writer can write

The Idle Woman says

Combining a solid knowledge of ancient history with dry, tongue-in-cheek humour, Tom Holt's "Olympiad" is perfect light reading. It follows the (mis)adventures of two brothers in the 8th Century BC, Cleander and Cratus, who set out with the blessing of their king Leon to promote a new concept: games-where-nobody's-died. Trekking across the Peloponnese from Sparta to Mycenae, Megara, Argos and Corinth, this conjures up a real sense of the lives and customs of the people who might have been involved in the first Olympic Games. As Holt explains in the prologue, the Games are important not only for their significance as a sporting event but also because the Greeks came to define their very history in terms of 'Olympiads'. The previous reviewer noted how Holt uses this theme of memory and history to very good effect as a framing device for the larger story. Highly recommended as the kind of easy, chatty book that's perfect for summer or holiday reading.

To see a longer review, please visit my blog here: <http://theidlewoman.blogspot.co.uk/20...>

David says

History? Why not? Immortality? Probably not. Humanity? Everywhere, through and through. A great story? You bet! Tom Holt wrote a gem of introspection in the form of traditional story telling about an epic Greek journey that no one knew about, but that may be the actual origin of the Olympic Games. I need to read this one again.

Derelict Space Sheep says

42 WORD REVIEW:

Nobody reading Tom Holt's historical novels could doubt that he is K J Parker. A scholar of Ancient Greek history, Holt peppered his Olympic Games origin story with gritty realism and a profoundly resigned appreciation of the nemesis inherent in human nature.

Faith Jones says

I think what this author is telling us is that the Olympics originated boringly. Or, at least, before the age of mass entertainment everything percolated through at a very slow pace.

As I understand it, before this and from this, the first sporting contests (e.g. wrestling) were only the accompaniment of funerary practices. The Greeks probably started it, then the Romans took sports one stage further by forcing gladiators to fight to their death at funerals, thus triggering more funerals.

The first Greek Olympic games, we hear, was essentially a religious gathering (like the Athenian Mysteries, but on an island) over the course of a few days which happened to have a single running race (in full armour and carrying a shield) at the very end of it. It was about honouring the gods and sport happened to be added on at the end. The fact that sport became all it was about, later, was a modern transformation.

Just as the original Olympics was not about sport, this book is not about the Olympics taking place; it's really a narrative around the people involved in its creation, touring all the islands and provinces to gather the diverse competitors. I like this aspect, although some readers will be frustrated by the wistful travelogue when they may have assumed they would be hearing about javelins, records and stuff.

Only in the classical ages could you go looking for an heroic sportsman, only to discover that he died 200 years previously and lots of people have since appeared under his name at funeral sports, thus increasing his legend. The word of mouth storytelling tradition helped to boost his reputation and provided more incentive to continue the pretence into the next generation. Is this how Hercules/Herakles became the legend he is, set amongst the stars? It's like when the longest-lived goldfish in the world (a school mascot) was explained as a series of goldfish that had died when taken home by pupils in the holidays and which had been replaced many times over. How many encores do you get?

It's a good book, charming occasionally and worth reading. It is very driftly and conversational though, to the point where the plot goes missing for large sections. Still, it makes you feel good and passes on a bit of real history on the region, culture and low-key origin of the games.

Liviu says

More dark irony adventures from the author - this time in Greece around 776 BC as implied by the title, but with lots of foreshadowing about the alphabet, the Greek renaissance, even Rome...

Same duo style of narration as in meadowland, from two brothers this time telling the story to a Phoenician merchant now as the outsider whose comments contrast with the brothers' narration.

Picaresque (mis) adventures around the Peloponnese and not only

Becci Gott says

After a slow start, this book has really got going. As long as you can keep up with a collection of Greek names and places! Not quite like other Tom Holt novels that I have read (less magic!) but a well written comedy of errors that I would recommend.
